

The English Spelling System:

An Attempt to Overcome Some of Its Inadequacies

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The English language is often said to be one of the most difficult in the world to learn. This is true not only for students of English as a second language but for native speakers of the language as well. One of the most difficult aspects of English is its spelling system, or, perhaps, one should say its lack of system. Though it may be too much to say that English spelling has no system, since English uses the Latin alphabet and, yet has about forty separate sounds, the chosen system of representation is inadequate to the needs of the language. This inadequacy has resulted in a confused spelling system with many different combinations of letters representing the same sounds. See, for example, Robert A. Hall, Jr., "Spelling and Sound in English," in Croft, Kenneth (ed), *Readings on English as a Second Language*, Winthrop, 1972.

It is obvious that the English language could do with a more accurate writing system. But the implementation of any innovation in one of the world's most widely used languages is fraught with problems. There is, for example, the ever present resistance on the part of most people to change. So, to ask such people to change something as traditional as their writing system is, for want of a better simile, like asking the Japanese people to give up rice and miso soup! Besides the problem of inertia, there are at least two very strong arguments against the use of a phonetic alphabet for the English language. One, of course, is the enormous cost involved in reeducating hundreds of millions of people in such an entirely new system of writing. The second, and more important, objection is that succeeding generations would, in large part, be alienated from their past. Not only would English speaking people with a phonetic writing system be cut off from their past, they would also be cut off from their sister languages. By this it is meant that many words in other European languages which are spelled similarly to their English cognates are pronounced quite differently. So with phonetic English spelling, cognates would be unrecognizable. (One can see that this very thing has taken place in Japan with the postwar changes in the Japanese writing system. Though it is partially due to changes in the language itself, many students at Japanese universities find it nearly impossible to read prewar books.) After all, people, like water, tend to take the

easiest path, be the destination a particular location or a particular way of reading. The problem, then, that this paper attempts to attack is to devise a spelling system for the English language which meets the following criteria:

1. The system be as nearly phonetic as possible, while, at the same time,
2. Being close enough to the present system that both be recognizable to all, and,
3. The costs of changing over to the new system be within reason.

The fact that the English sound system is represented by only twenty six letters gives rise to spelling difficulties in the English language. Phonetically speaking, the English language has approximately forty sounds. These include nearly thirty consonant sounds and ten or eleven vowel sounds which are either used or recognized by the speakers of all the major dialects of the language. With so many sounds and so few letters, very often a letter or group of letters may have several different pronunciations and, a particular sound may have several different spellings. Before continuing, it should be noted that this short essay does not attempt to replace the present system of English spelling but to supplement it, to be an aid to the reader. For the most part, traditional pronunciation and spelling rules are valuable. For instance, the pronunciation of 'c' is traditionally taught as controlled by the vowel it proceeds. If it is followed by 'a' 'o' or 'u' it is pronounced as [k]. If followed by 'e' or 'i' it is pronounced as [s]. The problem might be outlined as follows: silent letters, consonants, name values, exceptions, and, finally, vowels.

Silent Letters

There are letters in some words which have no sound value at all. These are holdovers from the past when these letters were once pronounced but no longer are. For instance, the 'ugh' in 'though' is not pronounced nor is the 'e' in 'note.' The latter is another example of a spelling/pronunciation rule which states that "a final 'e' of a word gives the previous vowel the value of its name." This problem of silent letters is not as serious as it might at first seem. With today's new printing techniques, silent letters could be printed a lighter shade to indicate they have no sound value. Another way to solve this part of our problem might be to simply underline the silent letters, e.g., 'though.' In any case, this part of the problem is not difficult.*

Consonants

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of English consonants is voicing. Very

* Some years ago the Chicago Tribune eliminated all silent letters so that 'though' became 'tho' and 'through' became 'thru', etc. This, however, is probably not the best solution.

often a consonant which is normally unvoiced finds itself in a sound pattern that causes it to be voiced. The opposite can be true for normally voiced consonants. To indicate whether a consonant be voiced or unvoiced we can make use of a diacritic such as a dot. A dot over a consonant or over and between two consonants would signify voicing, e.g., 's' 'th'. A dot placed under one or two consonants would indicate it or they are unvoiced, e.g., 'd' 'th'. The first example can be found in 'has', the second in 'them', the third and fourth in 'walked' and 'through'. While there are more problems with consonants I will leave them for the next two sections.

Name Values

In the previous section the problem of voiced and unvoiced consonants was discussed. Sometimes, however, a consonant is given a pronunciation that is normally associated with an entirely different consonant. The word 'suggest' is a case in point. The two gees might be phonetically represented as [gj]. To indicate the actual pronunciation of the second 'g' we could assign it its name value. That is, the letter 'g' when listed in the alphabet is pronounced gee or [ji]. We could do this by using half size capital letters which would not be costly to employ. Using this idea with our example we get 'suggest' or [sug jiest]. This is much closer than [sug gest] which, to the Japanese reader, might sound a bit like a vinegary guest.

This idea would be especially useful with vowels. For example, 'a' is often pronounced [ei] as in 'a, b, c' or as in 'cake'. If this were to be written as [cake], there could be no mistake as to its pronunciation once this rule were learned.

Table 1

The Use of Half-Size Capitals

Symbol	Example
A = ei	take [take]
U = yu	unit [unit]
I/Y = ai	bike, cycle [bike] [cycle]

Exceptions

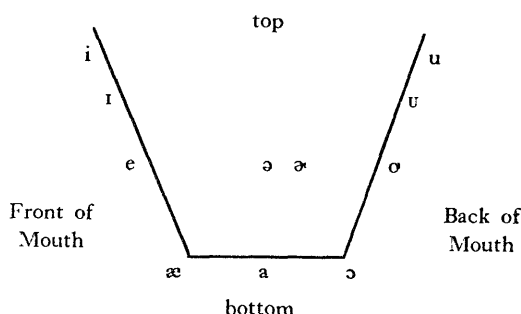
Where there is an exception, a line over the letter or letters would indicate a deviation that is not explained in this paper, e.g., 'acquaint'. A line over the 'qu' would indicate an exceptional spelling for [w]. Since exceptions are numerous it would not serve much to list many here, but simply say that a line over a letter is a sign of caution to the reader. That he must check in a dictionary to ascertain the word's proper pronunciation. (If silent letters could be printed a lighter shade, then exceptions might be better marked with an

underline rather than a line over the exception.)

Vowels

Though both consonants and vowels present serious difficulties, it is the vowels that give the learner the most trouble as they have as many or more various spellings as all the consonants put together have. It would behoove us, therefore, at this point, to take a brief look at the English vowel system. Traditionally we are taught that there are five vowels: 'a' 'e' 'i' 'o' and 'u' and sometimes 'y'. While this is true for Latin it is not so for English. Fortunately, linguists have made a more accurate count below.

Chart 1-English Vowels



Examples of words containing these vowel sounds from the upper left [i] to the lower middle [a] and continuing up to the upper right [u], plus the middle vowels [ə] and [ɜ] are given below.

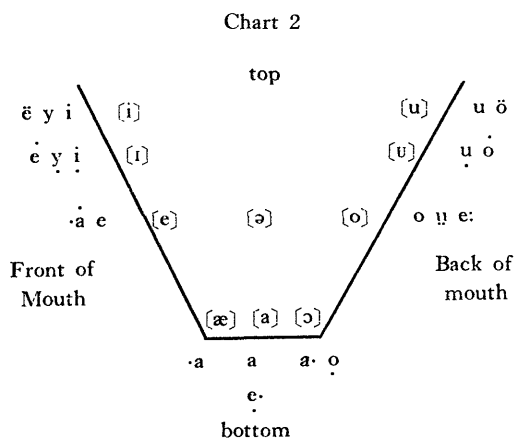
Table 2

[i]	— be, he, machine, week, key
[ɪ]	— hit, been, busy, myth, build
[e]	— set, friend, said, any
[æ]	— bat, laugh
[a]	— father, heart, far
[ɔ]	— bought, broad, tall, law
[o]	— note, road, doe, flow
[ʊ]	— put, good, should
[u]	— rule, grew, move, to, too, two
[ə]	— but, son, does, mountain
[ɜ]	— right, ruler, write*

With the exception of [a] [e] [i] [o] [u], these phonetic symbols are

* Though normally thought of as a consonant, the English 'r' is actually a vowel, because the tip of the tongue does not touch the mouth as it does with the Japanese 'r', or as with the Latin 'r'.

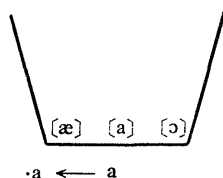
unacceptable because they do not meet criteria two and three. They are not similar enough to the present spelling system to allow the general populace to shift back and forth from one system to the other. Moreover, typesetting costs would be comparatively high. One possibility in solving the problem is to use diacritics. If we were to use a full set of diacritics, however, one for each vowel sound, we would face the same objections as above. If, on the other hand, a limited number of diacritics were used, we might take a step closer to solving the problem as stated in this paper. Thus in Chart 2 there are only two diacritics: the schwa [ə] which, when placed over any vowel, would indicate the unstressed, middle vowel, [ə] in Chart 1. The second diacritic, for want of a better term, might be called a positional diacritic. Actually this would be a dot or period system similar in appearance to that used to indicate voicing of consonants but quite different in function.



The phonetic symbols inside the line in brackets are the same as those in Chart 1 and the letters outside the line have the same sound value as the adjacent symbols inside the line, e.g., 'y' 'i' and [ɪ] are the same as are [o] 'o' 'u' and 'e'. Once the sounds have been learned, Chart 2 should not be at all difficult to use. The dots or periods would be placed in one or more of four positions about a given vowel (top, bottom, left and right) to indicate the vowel's position on the chart in relation to its pronunciation. The dots can be thought of as pulling a letter to the position of pronunciation on Chart 2. It should be mentioned in passing that since the letter 'y' as a vowel usually has the same sound as [i] or [ɪ] so we can also write these sounds as [y] and [y̞] respectively. In some cases, such as the 'a' in 'many' or the first 'e' in 'sergeant' or the 'o' in 'move', two dots would be necessary to move the vowel to its proper pronunciation position. For example, the word 'man' is actually pronounced [mæn], so, if we placed a dot on the left side of the 'a', it would tell us to

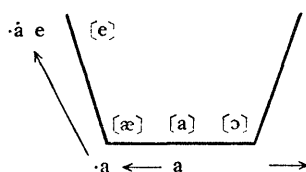
cast our eyes one position to the left from the [a] on Chart 2 to find [·a] or [æ], the proper pronunciation of the 'a' in 'man'.

Chart 3



To give another example, the 'a' in 'many' is pronounced [e] which is not directly adjacent to the [a] on Chart 2. So, after placing a dot to the left of the 'a', as in Chart 3, if we place another dot on top of the 'a', we would have the following symbol [·ä] which would move the 'a' to the [e] position as shown in Chart 4 below:

Chart 4



The resulting construction 'm·äny' may seem awkward, but it has the advantage of being compatible with the traditional system and, therefore, recognizable by all who already know the word. On the other hand, if we were to spell 'many' phonetically as [meni], few would be able to recognize it in this form. With the diacritic system presented in this paper, one can not only recognize the traditional spelling of words, but discern a word's proper pronunciation as well.

Though, for the most part, this diacritic system would be no more clumsy than the above example, some cases, such as that of 'grew', it might be a bit too awkward. In this case, we would have to use four dots. Two to the right to pull the 'e' over to the [o] position and then two more on top to pull the 'e' up to the [u] position. One possible way to overcome this problem might be to underline the 'e' and half of the 'w' as well. This would mean that since half of the 'w' is silent, the remaining half, now a single 'u' would have the [u] sound. So, the spelling of 'grew' as 'grew' would indicate that it should be pronounced as [gru]. This is somewhat less awkward than 'grë:w.'

Review

Before applying the system, let us briefly review the few symbols it employs. An underline (_) indicates that the letter above it is silent. Second, a dot

above or below a consonant indicates that the consonant is voiced or unvoiced, above for voiced and below for unvoiced. Third, a line above a letter (¯) indicates a variation that is not covered by the system in this essay. Next, a schwa (̃) over any vowel indicates the mid, unstressed vowel sound written in Chart 1 as [ə]. Finally, for the positional diacritic system, refer back to Chart 2.

Illustration

The passage chosen was taken from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, the scene in which the hero and heroine make their escape to Switzerland in a rowboat. The writer urges the reader to read the passage aloud, applying the system presented in this paper.

I rowed a ll night. Finally my h and s were so sore I cou ld hardly close them over the oars. We were nearly sm ashed up on the shore several times. I kept fairly close to the shore be cause I was afraid of getting lost on the lake and losing time. Sometimes we were so close we cou ld see a row of trees and the road along the shore with the mountains behind. The rain stopped and the wind drove the clouds so that the moon shone through and looking back I cou ld see a long dark headland and the lake with white-caps and beyond, the moon on the high snow mountains. Then the clouds came over the moon again and the mountains and the lake were gone, but it was much lighter than before and we cou ld see the shore. I cou ld see it too clearly and pulled out where [weir] they cou ld not see the boat if there [their] were custom guards along the road. When the moon came out again we cou ld see white villas on the shores on the slopes of the mountain and the white road where [weir] it showed through the trees. All the time I was rowing.

Conclusion

While it cannot be said that the suggestions made in this paper are a cure-all for English spelling, at the very least, an attempt has been made to make its

spelling system a bit more logical, its pronunciation a bit less difficult to determine. The system presented in this paper leaves traditional spelling essentially intact which is an aid to those who already know it and, at the same time, the system allows the reader to more accurately determine correct pronunciation. It is the writer's hope that some such system as this will one day be available to aid the learner of the English language.

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